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EASTERN GUNWINGGU FISH TRAPPING AT GUNBATGARRI

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ABSTRACT

The eastern Gunwinggu of Central Arnhem Land construct a conical fish trap called *mandjabu* which is used in conjunction with a trapping fence to catch mainly barramundi and catfish. Traditionally fish trapping was an important subsistance activity during the plentiful early dry season. Today, although its economic significance has declined somewhat owing to the adoption of market technology, fish trapping remains symbolically important as it also reinforces the status of the senior men who control its use.

I. *Introduction**.

This paper has been prepared to document a conical fish trap called *mandjabu* in the Gunwinggu language, that was sold to the Northern Territory museum in Darwin. The trap was manufactured by Anchor Galumba of Gun.gurulk clan estate (*gunnguya*), the senior land owner at Momega outstation in North-Central Arnhem Land. Momega is some 70 road kilometres from Maningrida township, and is occupied by eastern Gunwinggu people. The large trap procured by the museum was used by these people at Gunbatgarri (see map) during the 1980 fish trapping season. Documentation in this paper will refer specifically to this trap rather than to a smaller type of trap of different construction, that is used infrequently today and that is described in Appendix A.

Four aspects of fish trapping are discussed here: the manufacture of the *mandjabu*, the construction of the fence or *gun.galehwobeh* used in conjunction with the trap, the actual trapping operation, and the economic and social significance of fish trapping for eastern Gunwinggu today. Following the text, a number of photographs are presented. This paper is written to be read with reference to these plates.

II. *Conical fish trap (mandjabu) manufacture.*

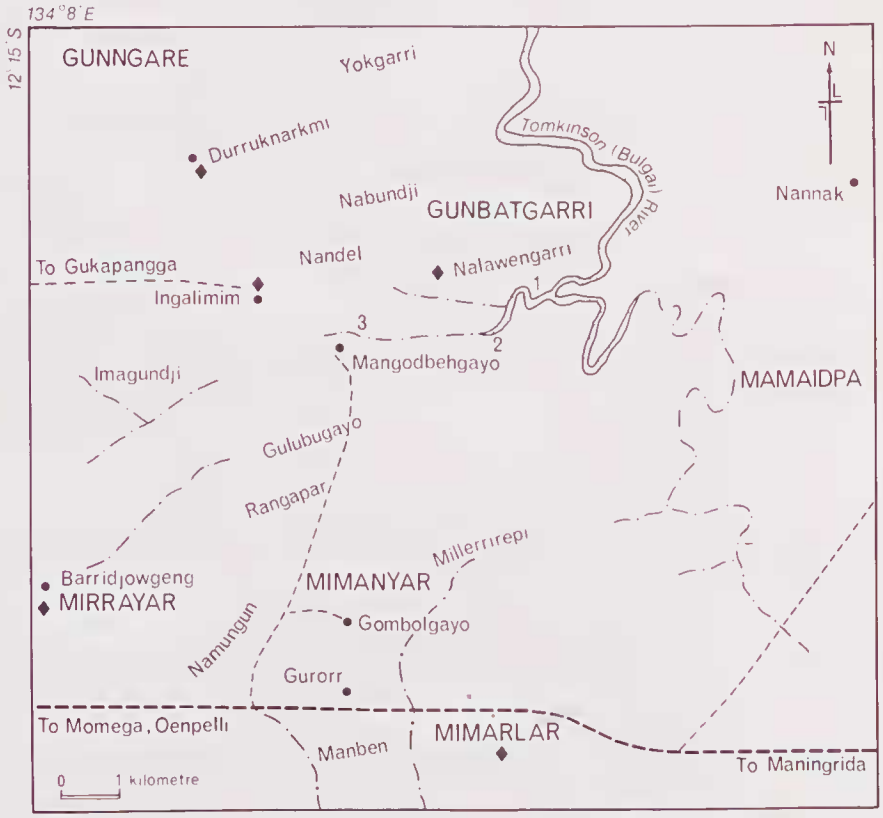
The *mandjabu* is made from *milil (Malaisia scandens)* a vine that grows at two specific locations — Millerrirepi in Gun.gurulk clan estate and Larrpa near Gugodbabuldi, in Gundan.golo clan estate (see Appendix B for grid references). Prior to trap construction *milil* is collected and is stored in coils — often soaking in water. In making a full size *mandjabu* two to three hundred metres of the vine are used.

Trap construction is undertaken in five stages and during manufacture, the trap is often submerged in water so as to maintain the flexibility of the *milil.*

* I would like to thank Anchor Galumha in particular, but also Miberal, Mawandjul and Djalhrali for teaching me about *mandjabu* 'business' during my residence at Momega outstation. Thanks are also due to Clyde Dunlop who identified plant species and to David Bond who recounted some recent history of trapping activities for me. In my orthography, ng is a velar nasal as in the English si; while a . as in the word Gun.gurulk distinguishes this sequence from the velar nasal.

SKETCH MAP OF GUNBATGARRI DISTRICT

(REFER R.A.S.C. MAP SD 53-Z TOMKINSON SHEET 5773)



KEY:
- ♦ Djang (dreaming/sacred) place
- • Camp
- ------ Major vehicle track
- - - - - Minor vehicle track (hunting track)
- Tidal river/creek
- —·—· Creek intermittent

GUNBATGARRI Regional name

Momega Place name

1. Ibitbillama
2. Gupparıya
3. Djattibakmin

The first stage in manufacture involves making the round outer entrance to the trap called the *gudjirrino* (see Plate 1). This is generally made from *manben (Wrightia saligna)* a supple wood found in tall open forest country. A piece of *manben* is bound into a circular shape with the vine *milil*. The next stage in production, involves attaching lengths of *milil* to the *gudjirrino*. Initially these are about 1.5 metres long. Once these lengths are in place, vertical sections are woven in place by twisting and knotting lengths of *milil* into place. The joining of vertical and horizontal sections results in a net like construct, with the length of the trap being determined by the lengths of the horizontal sections. In stage three, the tail or *betno* of the trap is tied. The *betno* can be tied with a variety of materials — *milil*, bush string made from *manyalmanyalk (Hibiscus meraukensis)* or from *den.gehmai (Melochia corchorifolia)*, or *Balanda* (European) rope. Usually *milil* lengths 0.25-0.5 metres long hang at the tail of the trap. The *betno* can be seen in Plate 2. Stage four involves placing one or two lengths of *manben* called *banabana* inside the trap to give it structural strength. The help of a small child or *wudut* is enlisted in this operation. The child crawls into the trap and is instructed by the trap maker where to pass out the lengths of *milil* utilised to secure the *banabana* in place. Once this is done, the construction of the outer trap called *man.gimuk* ('big one') is completed. The final stage involves the making of the inner trap or entrance called the *manyaw* ('little one'). This is constructed like the outer from a circular piece of *manben* and *milil* lengths that are woven closely. When the *manyaw* is completed, it is lashed into the front of the *man.gimuk* with *milil*.

The completed trap is illustrated in Plate 2. It is important to note that among eastern Gunwinggu there is a strict division of labour governing the manufacture of the large *milil mandjabu*: it is men's domain. The smaller *manyilk mandjabu* is also generally made by men, but eastern Gunwinggu say that women are not restricted from constructing the smaller traps.

As already noted, the *milil* (and large) conical fish trap is one of two types made by eastern Gunwinggu. The other is made from *manyilk (Cyperus javanicus)* a grass that is readily available during the late wet season *ban.gerreng*. The *milil* trap is bigger and stronger than the *manyilk* variety and is used in tidal reaches of creeks to catch large fish such as *namanggol* (silver barramundi, *Lates calcarifer*) and *nadjalek* (lesser salmon catfish, *Hexanematichthys leptaspis*). The smaller and lighter *manyilk* trap is used in fresh water flowing creeks to catch small fish like *botok* (jewel perch, *Madigania unicolor*) and the fresh water prawn *yat (Macrobrachiyum sp.)*. *Manyilk mandjabu* construction is further described in Appendix A.

III. *Trapping fence (gun.galehwobeh) construction.*

The *gun.galehwobeh* is a fence that is used in conjunction with the large conical fish trap. At Gunbatgarri region where the *mandjabu* is used during the yearly trapping season there are three fences. The first is 'on top' or *gartum* where Bulgai Creek is only a stream (see map). This place is known as Djattibakmin (translated: 'broken frog'). The second fence is further down Bulgai Creek at a place called Guppariya. Both these trapping fences are fairly low simple structures and are in open plain country. The main *gun.galehwobeh* is located at Ibitbillama and is in the midst of the dense tropical fringe of Bulgai Creek where the creek is strongly tidal. (This is illustrated in Plate 3).

PLATE 1

PLATE 2

These trapping fences were made once upon a time — *gunngareh* (long long time ago) — but nowadays they are customarily repaired from one trapping season at Gunbatgarri to the next. The trapping fence must be rigorously constructed for it cannot allow fish through it and must be strong enough to withstand the tidal flow of the water in the creek. The fence has one or more openings (depending on how many traps are used) over which the conical fish traps are fitted.

During the 1980 early dry season, the fences at Guppariya and Ibitbillama only were utilised. The wooden uprights of the trapping fence are constructed from the trunks of a paperbark called *manworrk (Melaleuca acacioides)* that grows on the flood plains. These uprights are set about one metre apart at the base and are firmly embedded in the mud bottom of the creek. In Plate 4, Galumba can be seen pushing uprights into the creek bed. At the start of each trapping season, the *gun.galehwobeh* is repaired. The uprights are opened up and heaps of *manborgorr (Pancium trachyrachis)* grass are jammed between the uprights to form the trapping fence wall. A cross-beam is then placed across the top of the fence, and the uprights are lashed together with more *manborgorr* grass (see Plate 5). In cross-section, the shape of the gun.galehwobeh is triangular, with the broad base being below the water level on the creek bottom; and the narrow top rising above the high water mark. Each time the conical fish trap is used, the trapping fence is checked for holes through which fish may escape. If they are found, they are repaired with a mixture of *manborgorr* grass and mud that is squashed into the fence wall.

IV. *Conical fish trap operation.*

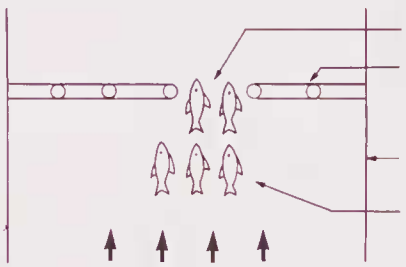
The *mandjabu* is generally used by eastern Gunwinggu during the early dry season *(yekeh)* when the drying east wind called *balmarrata* blows constantly. As the Tomkinson flood plains dry out, people move northwards towards Bulgai Creek. During May 1980, eastern Gunwinggu camped at Gurorr, and occasionally walked to Gunbatgarri region to fish for barramundi. By late May, there was a camp shift to Gombolgayo, as the fresh water at Gurorr dried up. Here Galumba manufactured the *mandjabu* from *milil* collected at Milerrirepi. During early June a number of band groups and household clusters gathered at Mangodbehgayo (translation: where the bush potato *(Cayratia trifolia)* lies). Crusoe Guningbal's band came from Barridjowgeng, Galumba's band moved down from Gombolgayo, Mawandjul's household cluster moved east from Momega, and Gun.gardbam and Gun.gulmaru people came from Marrgulidban and Gubumi outstations respectively. The conical fish trap was carried to Mangodbehgayo by Galumba's son Iyuna in early June.

The operation of the *mandjabu* involves a hierarchical social organisation of production, for among eastern Gunwinggu this production process has to be managed and operated by elders. At present Galumba is the senior trap operator but other elders like Guningbal and Gubargu have the required seniority to use the trap. There is a strict division of labour both by sex and age grading which dictates that only senior males can assist with *gun.galehwobeh* construction and in operating the trap. Young men are not permitted to help and women and children are not allowed anywhere near the trapping location.

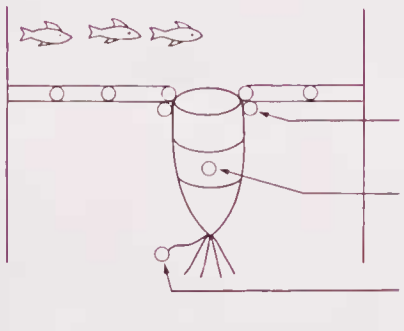
The principle of the trapping operation is illustrated in Diagram 1. As the tide comes in at the mouth of the Liverpool River some 20 kilometres north where it flows into the Arafura Sea, the water level in Bulgai Creek

Diagram 1: MANDJABU OPERATION
(BIRD'S EYE VIEW)

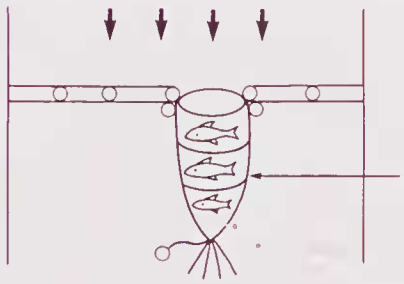
1. INCOMING TIDE: FISH SWIM UP CREEK



2. FULL TIDE: TRAP PUT IN PLACE



3. OUTGOING TIDE: FISH TRAPPED



(NOT TO SCALE)

PLATE 3

PLATE 4

(Tomkinson River) rises. Barramundi and catfish swim upstream through the gap left in the trapping fence to feed in the upper reaches of the creek. This is stage 1 in the figure.

When the tide is full, the conical fish trap is placed over the gap in the trapping fence. The entrance of the trap is jammed into the gap in the *gun.galehwobeh* and is secured in place with sticks and grass. The tail of the trap is tied to a piece of wood that has been embedded in the soft creek floor. Finally a thin piece of wood is placed through the trap. This acts as an indicator when the trap should be hauled out of the water, for when fish enter the trap, the stick vibrates rapidly. In Plate 6 Galumba can be seen placing the thin stick (*gundulk*) through the submerged trap.

The final step involves waiting for the water level in the creek to drop as the tide retreats. As the water level drops, fish in the upper reaches of the creek attempt to swim down towards the deeper salt water (*gurula*) but get entrapped in the *mandjabu*. The *manyaw* is shaped so as to allow fish to force their way into the trap, but once inside they cannot escape, particularly as the fish attempt to swim with, rather than against, the tidal flow of the creek. This final stage in the trapping operation requires patience for custom (see below) dictates that eastern Gunwinggu cannot sleep in the vicinity of the trap; nor are people permitted to talk above a whisper. Occasionally, debris gets entangled in the mouth of the trap and this is quickly cleared away. When the trap is either full of fish, or when the tide is finally right out it is lifted out of its position and emptied. Each time this is done, the small inner trap, the *manyaw* must be untied. This process is illustrated in Plate 7. In Plate 8, Galumba can be seen lifting the trap out of Bulgai Creek.

The actual operation of the *mandjabu* is obviously in the subsistence production realm, but it is an economic activity greatly regulated by superstructural considerations. Near the trapping fences lies an important sacred site or *gubolk djang* called Nalawengarri (see Map). This *djang* place is a grove of *gundayar (Pandanus spiralis)* that rises spectacularly in the middle of the flood plain. In the past, the bodies of the dead were placed on platforms in this region and their spirits went to live at Nalawengarri. Today, the spirits of the dead called *wayarrah* continue to reside at this place. These spirits awaken when they hear Gunwinggu move to Mangodbehgayo; and when they see the trapping fences being repaired they know that another trapping season is about to begin. Hence when trapping begins, the area around the trapping locations becomes dangerous *(nabang)* for women and children. Conversely, *wayarrah* do not like children in the trapping vicinity; and fish that are caught in Bulgai Creek prior to 'proper' trapping time must not be consumed by women and children — these fish should be taboo or *ngaldjamun*. When men trap they stay awake in reverence for the spirits of the dead, and also to make sure the *wayarrah* do not speak up, put their hands through the *manyaw* and steal all the fish. It is generally accepted by eastern Gunwinggu men that *wayarrah* will take a share of the catch; but if they are angered they may take all and leave none for *Bining* (the Aborigines). On one occasion when I was trapping with Galumba and his sons, the *gundulk* in the trap quivered furiously indicating a trap full of fish. However when the trap was hauled out of the water, there were no fish in it. Galumba swore profusely at the world in general and at the *wayarrah* that stole the fish in particular.

PLATE 5

PLATE 6

PLATE 7

PLATE 8

V. *The economic and social significance of fish trapping.*

The early dry season is traditionally a time of surplus in the eastern Gunwinggu annual seasonal subsistence production cycle. It follows the lean times of the wet seasons that extend from about December to April each year. Both Sweeney (1939) and Kyle-Little (1957) who visited this region on patrols prior to prolonged European contact, commented on the richness of the subsistence resources in Gunbatgarri region during this season; and on the large camps of Gumawurrk (eastern Gunwinggu) people that congregated to exploit these bush foods. An equally rich area occupied during this season by Gun.gurrgoni and Gunardpa people is Mamaidpa on the eastern side of Bulgai Creek.

The economic significance of fish trapping in the contemporary context must be viewed from a dual perspective, for currently the eastern Gunwinggu economy has both subsistence (hunting, fishing and gathering) and cash components.

There is little doubt that fish trapping with the *mandjabu* can be an extremely effective mode of catching fish; large immediate surpluses were recorded for the 1976 and 1977 trapping seasons (see below) and older Gunwinggu are adamant that in the past huge catches were taken annually. For the two early dry seasons that I have conducted anthropological fieldwork with eastern Gunwinggu the returns from trapping have not been particularly significant. Last year (1979) this was due to the fact that people did not trap at Gunbatgarri, for during this season Gun.gurulk people were the hosts for a Gunabibi ritual cult ceremony at Mimarlar. However, (see Appendix A) a small *manyilk mandjabu* was used that year at Minelleh. This year (1980), the fish harvest was small — partly because the 1978/79 wet seasons had been particularly light and partly because Galumba used the trap late in the season when few large fish remained in the upper reaches of Bulgai Creek.

Two factors tend to reduce the overall significance of fish trapping in subsistence production today. Firstly, there are many other foodstuff resources available during the early dry season at Gunbatgarri. Birdlife species like the *benok* (bush turkey, *Ardeotis australis*), the *munuparr* (magpie goose, *Anseranas semipalmata*), the *ngalgordoh* (brolga, *Rus rubicundus*), the *garala* (straw-necked ibis, *Threskiornis spinicollis*) and the *djeeleekweebee* (water whistle duck, *Dendrocygna arcuata*) all nest on the flood plains during the late wet season and early dry. Today with the general use of the shotgun these species are all readily accessible game. Vegetable foods, in particular *bulparrt, wayuk* and *ganwerr* (the root, the stem and the bulb of the water lily *Nymphaca gigantea)* are also readily available during *yekeh* time. The bulb in particular is exploited to make the bush bread called *man.go*. Secondly, the advent of the general use of fish lures has greatly undermined the technological superiority of the fish trap vis-a-vis other forms of traditional technology. During the 1980 early dry season for example, far more fish were taken by lure than via trapping — although most of these fish were taken in May and early June before the trap had been set. The fish wire or *djalakrad* is also widely used as the waters on the flood plain recede. While elders continue to monopolise the use of the fish trap, they are unable to restrict access to introduced technology like lures and lines that undermines the productivity of their specialisation.

The significance of trapped fish in the total diet is further undermined by the availability of *Balanda* (European or

market) foodstuffs that are paid for with cash earned by the production of artefacts for exchange and received from social security entitlements. During the trapping season, the Maningrida Progress Association's mobile store visited Gunbatgarri on its regular fortnightly basis.

The *mandjabu* can be of significance in the monetised sector of the economy in two ways. Firstly, immediate surpluses of fish can be marketed. Records of the Maningrida Progress Association indicate that in the 1976 early dry season, 300 kilograms of fish were sold to Maningrida people by eastern Gunwinggu; while in 1977, 400 kilograms of barramundi was marketed. This realised cash income of $450 and $400 respectively for eastern Gunwinggu.

Secondly, the *mandjabu* is itself a relatively rare Aboriginal artefact that can be marketed via the Maningrida Art and Craft Centre. Galumba awaits the trapping season with optimism: he knows that even if there is a poor season at Gunbatgarri, Peter Cooke the art and craft adviser will be keen to procure the conical fish trap for two to three hundred dollars.

The wider significance of fish trapping also has a dual perspective. At a level internal to the band and its social organisation of production, the manufacture and operation of the *mandjabu* continues to be recognised as elders' domain. Even though the overall economic significance of trapping has decreased in post-contact times, there are still important symbolic aspects to its use: it is a productive activity that is controlled by elders and that has a degree of ritual status associated with it. As such, it is still regarded with awe and respect by younger people. A few men are apprentices in *mandjabu* 'business' and each season Galumba slowly reveals additional aspects of the trapping operation to these men. Fish trapping continues to play a role in the regulation and ascription of social status in eastern Gunwinggu society.

At a wider level, external to the band and clan, fish trapping and the richness of subsistence resources associated with the trapping season at Gunbatgarri traditionally signalled for a large gathering of various band groups at the one location. While the economic need to trap fish to support a large conglomeration of people has decreased somewhat today, people still come to Gunbatgarri today for the fish harvest, expecting and hoping for a large immediate surplus of fish. Because trapping is conducted by only a few men, the majority of camp residents can have a leisurely time after the hardships of the wet seasons. And because elders are seen to provide for the welfare of the entire camp, their status increases. The availability of leisure time and plentitude during the trapping season helps to harmonise relations between band groups that have been isolated from each other over the wet seasons and provides an atmosphere of social solidarity conducive to ceremonial activity. At Mangodbehgayo this year, the population of the camp steadily increased until by late June over 100 people were gathered at the one location. Then a Gunwoning washing ceremony (a funeral rite) was held. By July, the fresh water billabongs at Gunbatgarri start to dry up and the band groups disperse again to return to the tall open forest hinterland to continue the food quest. They regroup again for the late dry season (*gurrung*) ceremonies and for the early wet season (*gunumeleng*).

REFERENCES

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2. Sweeney, G. (1939): Report of patrol in the Junction Bay, Liverpool River and Tomkinson River Areas, July-August, 1939. Typescript. Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Darwin.

Appendix A: The Manyilk Mandjabu.

The smaller conical fish trap is made from the grass *manyilk (Cyperus javanicus)* that is readily available during the late wet season *ban.gerreng.* Three strands of the grass are twisted together to form the string from which this trap is constructed. The *manyilk* conical fish trap is made in much the same way as the *milil* or vine variety.

A small *manyilk* trap was used at Minnelleh during May 1979. It is also used at a location called Guruldul. The trap is designed specifically to catch small fresh water aquatic fauna in small creeks like Mimanyar Creek (see Map). The trapping fence used with this trap is generally a low simple structure that is often made with leaves rather than with *manborgorr* grass. In most respects the operation of the two traps is identical, except that the operation of the smaller *mandjabu* is not dependent on the tide; it is placed over the hole in the trapping fence through which fresh water is continually running.

For eastern Gunwinggu, the *manyilk mandjabu* and its operation does not command the same social and economic significance as the *milil* variety. This is partly because the fish caught in the smaller trap are less highly valued; it is also because these species have lower ritual (totemic) significance than the barramundi and lesser salmon catfish. The trapping locations at Minnelleh and Guruldul do not have sacred sites near them.

Appendix B: References to places referred to in paper (see R.A.S.C. Map SD 53-2 Sheet 5773 Tomkinson).

Place name	Patri-clan estate *(Gunnguya)*	Clan patri-moiety	Grid Reference
Momega outstation*	*Gun.gurulk*	*Dua*	MG 060 330
Millerrirepi	”	”	MG 192 385
Gombolgayo	”	”	MG 160 360
Mimarlar	”	”	MG 210 340
Minnelleh*	”	”	MG 210 260
Ibitbillama	*Gundan.golo*	*Yirritja*	MG 186 457
Guppariya	”	”	MG 172 445
Djattibakmin	”	”	MG 162 443
Nalawengarri	”	”	MG 165 445
Mangodbehgayo	”	”	MG 152 432
Larrpa*	”	”	MG 068 298
Barridjowgeng outstation	”	”	MG 111 352

Footnote: *Not on sketch map.